

Youth Mental Health in the Digital Age: Sociological Perspectives and Social Work Interventions

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technology has significantly transformed human life, particularly among youth. Smartphones, social media platforms, online gaming, artificial intelligence, and digital communication tools have become central to the daily experiences of young people. While these technologies provide opportunities for education, social connection, creativity, and access to information, they also present challenges that affect youth mental health and well-being. Increasing rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, cyberbullying, digital addiction, and sleep disturbances have raised concerns among sociologists, psychologists, educators, and social work professionals. From a sociological perspective, technology influences human relationships, social structures, identity formation, and cultural values. Social work, on the other hand, focuses on promoting human well-being through prevention, intervention, counseling, advocacy, and community support. This paper examines the impact of digital technology on youth mental health through sociological perspectives and social work interventions. It explores the conceptual foundations of digital technology and mental health, analyzes sociological theories related to technological change, and highlights both the positive and negative effects of digital engagement on young people. The study emphasizes the importance of human-centered approaches that encourage responsible technology use while protecting psychological well-being. It further argues that families, schools, communities, policymakers, and social workers must collaborate to create supportive digital environments that foster resilience, emotional health, and healthy human development. Understanding the relationship between technology and mental health is essential for addressing emerging challenges and ensuring that digital innovation contributes positively to the overall well-being of youth in contemporary society.

Keywords: Youth Mental Health, Digital Technology, Social Media, Human Development, Sociology, Social Work, Digital Well-Being, Cyberbullying, Digital Addiction, Psychological Health.

1. Introduction

The digital age has transformed nearly every aspect of human life, reshaping how people communicate, learn, work, and interact. Young people, often referred to as digital natives, have grown up in environments

where smartphones, social media platforms, online gaming, and internet-based communication are deeply integrated into everyday experiences. Digital technology has become a powerful force influencing human behavior, social relationships, and psychological well-being. While technological advancements have created unprecedented opportunities for learning, creativity, and social participation, they have also introduced new challenges that affect youth mental health. Increasing concerns about anxiety, depression, loneliness, cyberbullying, digital addiction, and emotional distress have generated widespread academic and professional interest in understanding the relationship between technology and mental health (Keles et al., 2020).

Youth represent a critical stage of human development characterized by identity formation, emotional growth, and social integration. During this period, digital environments significantly influence self-perception, peer relationships, and decision-making processes. Sociologists argue that technological innovation has altered traditional social structures and patterns of interaction, creating new forms of social engagement and cultural expression (Castells, 2010). At the same time, excessive digital engagement may reduce face-to-face communication and increase vulnerability to psychological stressors. From a social work perspective, promoting youth mental health requires understanding both the opportunities and risks associated with digital technology. Social workers play a crucial role in supporting young people through counseling, advocacy, prevention programs, and community interventions aimed at fostering healthy technology use. Therefore, examining youth mental health in the digital age demands an interdisciplinary approach that combines sociological analysis with social work practice. Such an approach contributes to human well-being by identifying strategies that maximize the benefits of digital technology while minimizing its adverse psychological consequences.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Digital technology refers to electronic systems and devices that generate, process, store, and transmit information through digital means. These technologies include smartphones, computers, social networking sites, mobile applications, virtual learning environments, and artificial intelligence systems. In contemporary society, digital technology has become an essential component of human interaction, influencing communication patterns, educational opportunities, employment practices, and social relationships. For young people, digital technology serves as a primary tool for learning, entertainment, socialization, and self-expression. Consequently, understanding its impact on youth mental health has become increasingly important in sociological and social work research.

Youth mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being during adolescence and early adulthood. Positive mental health enables individuals to manage stress, build healthy relationships, make informed decisions, and contribute productively to society (World Health Organization, 2024). However, mental health challenges among youth have become more visible in the digital era. Research indicates that excessive social media use, online comparison, cyberbullying, and digital dependency can negatively affect self-esteem, emotional stability, and overall well-being (Twenge, 2020). The relationship between digital technology and mental health is complex and multidimensional. On one hand, technology provides access to educational resources, online counseling, peer support groups, and mental health awareness campaigns. On the other hand, prolonged exposure to digital environments may contribute to

social isolation, stress, sleep disturbances, and addictive behaviors. From a human-centered perspective, digital technology should be viewed as both an opportunity and a challenge for youth development. Understanding this relationship requires recognizing how technological engagement shapes human experiences, social interactions, and emotional health. Such conceptual understanding provides the foundation for developing effective interventions that promote digital well-being and support the mental health needs of young people.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

Sociological perspectives provide valuable insights into the relationship between technology, society, and human behavior. Technology is not merely a collection of tools; it is a social force that influences cultural values, social relationships, and patterns of interaction. Functionalist theory views technology as a mechanism that contributes to social progress by improving communication, education, and access to information. From this perspective, digital technology enhances human efficiency and supports social integration by connecting individuals across geographical and cultural boundaries (Merton, 1968). Conflict theory offers a different interpretation by emphasizing inequalities associated with technological development. Scholars argue that access to digital resources is unevenly distributed, creating a digital divide that affects educational opportunities, social participation, and mental health outcomes. Youth from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience limited access to technology, while others may face excessive exposure to digital risks, including cyberbullying and online exploitation (Fuchs, 2021).

Symbolic interactionism focuses on everyday human interactions and the meanings individuals attach to digital experiences. Social media platforms have become important spaces where young people construct identities, present themselves to others, and seek social validation. Online interactions influence self-esteem, social status, and emotional well-being, demonstrating how technology shapes human experiences at the micro level (Goffman, 1959). Castells' (2010) Network Society Theory further explains how digital technologies create interconnected social networks that transform communication and social organization. These networks influence how young people develop relationships, access information, and participate in society. From a social work perspective, understanding these sociological perspectives helps professionals address the psychological and social consequences of digital technology. Such knowledge supports the development of human-centered interventions that promote healthy technology use, strengthen social relationships, and enhance youth mental health in an increasingly digital world.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR HUMAN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Digital technology has emerged as a significant tool for human development, particularly among youth. The integration of technology into education, communication, and skill development has created unprecedented opportunities for young people to expand their knowledge and enhance their capabilities. Access to online learning platforms, digital libraries, educational applications, and virtual classrooms has revolutionized the learning process, enabling youth to acquire information beyond traditional educational settings. Technology also facilitates creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship by providing platforms for content creation, collaborative learning, and professional networking (Selwyn, 2016). From a sociological perspective, technology serves as an agent of social mobility by increasing access to educational and economic resources. Young people can develop digital competencies that improve

employability and prepare them for participation in a technology-driven society. Furthermore, digital platforms encourage civic engagement and social awareness, enabling youth to participate in discussions related to social justice, environmental sustainability, and community development (Castells, 2010).

However, the benefits of technology depend on responsible and equitable access. The digital divide continues to affect marginalized populations, limiting opportunities for some youth. Social workers emphasize the importance of ensuring digital inclusion and empowering young people to use technology in ways that promote personal growth and social well-being. When used effectively, digital technology can enhance human potential, foster resilience, and contribute positively to youth development.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG YOUTH

Social media platforms have become influential spaces where young people construct and express their identities. Adolescence and youth are critical stages of human development during which individuals explore personal values, beliefs, aspirations, and social roles. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X, and TikTok provide opportunities for self-expression, communication, and social interaction. Through these platforms, youth share experiences, create digital identities, and seek recognition from peers (Boyd, 2014).

Sociologists argue that identity formation is a social process shaped by interactions and social feedback. Social media intensifies this process by allowing individuals to present curated versions of themselves to a broad audience. While positive feedback can enhance self-esteem and confidence, excessive dependence on online validation may create emotional vulnerability and psychological distress (Goffman, 1959). Young people often compare themselves with idealized portrayals of others, leading to dissatisfaction with appearance, lifestyle, or achievements. From a social work perspective, fostering healthy identity development requires helping youth critically evaluate online content and develop self-worth independent of digital approval. Digital literacy education can empower young people to navigate social media responsibly while maintaining realistic self-perceptions. Therefore, understanding social media's role in identity formation is essential for promoting positive mental health and human development.

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY AND HUMAN SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Digital connectivity has transformed the nature of human relationships by enabling continuous communication across geographical boundaries. Through messaging applications, social networking platforms, and video conferencing technologies, young people can maintain relationships with family members, friends, and communities regardless of distance. These technologies strengthen social networks and provide opportunities for emotional support and social participation (Putnam, 2000).

Despite these benefits, sociologists have raised concerns regarding the quality of digitally mediated relationships. Excessive reliance on online communication may reduce face-to-face interactions, limiting opportunities for developing empathy, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills. Research suggests that while youth may have numerous online connections, they may still experience loneliness and social isolation (Turkle, 2017). From a social work perspective, healthy human relationships remain essential for emotional well-being. Social workers encourage balanced engagement with digital technologies while

promoting meaningful interpersonal interactions. Strengthening family communication, peer support systems, and community participation can help youth maintain healthy social relationships in the digital era.

DIGNITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF CYBERBULLYING AND ONLINE HARASSMENT

Cyberbullying has emerged as one of the most significant threats to youth mental health in the digital age. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying occurs through digital platforms such as social media, messaging applications, online gaming communities, and discussion forums. It includes behaviors such as harassment, spreading rumors, threats, humiliation, exclusion, and the sharing of harmful content. Due to the widespread accessibility of digital technology, cyberbullying can occur at any time and reach large audiences, increasing its psychological impact on young people (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018).

From a sociological perspective, cyberbullying reflects broader social inequalities, power imbalances, and patterns of aggression present in society. Online anonymity often encourages individuals to engage in behaviors they might avoid in face-to-face interactions. Victims of cyberbullying frequently experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, fear, loneliness, and emotional distress. In severe cases, prolonged victimization has been associated with self-harm and suicidal ideation (Kowalski et al., 2019). Adolescents are particularly vulnerable because social acceptance and peer relationships play a crucial role in their development.

The human consequences of cyberbullying extend beyond psychological harm. Victims may experience academic difficulties, social withdrawal, and diminished trust in others. Social workers play a vital role in supporting affected youth through counseling, advocacy, crisis intervention, and school-based prevention programs. Educational institutions can also implement digital citizenship programs that promote respectful online behavior and empathy. Families are equally important in monitoring online activities and maintaining open communication with young people. Addressing cyberbullying requires a collective effort involving parents, educators, policymakers, technology companies, and social workers. Protecting human dignity in digital spaces is essential for ensuring safe environments where youth can engage positively without fear of harassment or discrimination.

HUMAN BEHAVIOUR AND DIGITAL ADDICTION: UNDERSTANDING PROBLEMATIC INTERNET USE

Digital addiction refers to excessive and compulsive engagement with digital technologies that interferes with daily functioning, relationships, academic performance, and psychological well-being. Among youth, problematic internet use often involves excessive social media engagement, online gaming, video streaming, and smartphone dependency. The growing availability of digital devices has increased concerns regarding addictive patterns of behavior that affect emotional and social development (Young, 2017).

From a sociological perspective, digital addiction reflects changing patterns of human behavior in technologically advanced societies. Digital platforms are designed to maximize user engagement through notifications, rewards, likes, and algorithm-driven content. These features stimulate psychological gratification and encourage prolonged usage. Young people may become dependent on digital interactions

for entertainment, validation, and social connection. As a result, they may neglect responsibilities, face-to-face relationships, and physical activities. Research indicates that digital addiction is associated with anxiety, depression, poor academic performance, reduced attention span, and emotional instability (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Excessive screen time may also contribute to social isolation despite increased online connectivity. Adolescents who struggle with digital addiction often experience difficulties regulating their technology use and may exhibit symptoms similar to behavioral addictions. From a social work perspective, intervention strategies focus on promoting digital literacy, self-regulation, and healthy lifestyle habits. Counseling services, family support programs, and school-based awareness initiatives can help youth develop balanced technology use. Encouraging participation in recreational activities, sports, and community engagement can reduce dependency on digital platforms.

Promoting responsible technology use is essential for protecting human well-being and ensuring that digital tools serve as resources for development rather than sources of psychological harm.

EMOTIONS, ANXIETY, AND DEPRESSION IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Digital technology has significantly influenced the emotional lives of young people. While online platforms provide opportunities for communication and social support, excessive or problematic use has been linked to increased levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness. Social media platforms expose youth to constant comparisons with peers, unrealistic standards of success, and pressure to maintain an idealized online image. Such experiences can negatively affect self-esteem and emotional well-being (Keles et al., 2020). Sociologically, digital environments influence how individuals perceive themselves and their social status. The desire for online validation through likes, comments, and followers may create emotional dependency. When expectations are unmet, feelings of inadequacy, rejection, and sadness may emerge. Furthermore, exposure to negative content, online conflicts, and misinformation can increase psychological distress among adolescents and young adults.

Research has shown that prolonged social media use is associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression, particularly among vulnerable youth populations (Twenge, 2020). Constant connectivity may also reduce opportunities for relaxation and emotional recovery. The fear of missing out (FOMO) further contributes to stress and emotional instability. From a social work perspective, supporting youth mental health requires promoting emotional resilience, self-awareness, and healthy coping mechanisms. Social workers can provide counseling services, psychoeducation, and support groups that help young people manage digital stressors. Families and schools can also foster supportive environments that encourage open discussions about emotional well-being. By understanding the relationship between digital technology and emotional health, society can develop strategies that protect youth from psychological harm while promoting positive human development and mental wellness.

HEALTH, SLEEP DISTURBANCES, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Sleep is a fundamental component of human health and psychological well-being. In the digital age, however, increasing use of smartphones, tablets, computers, and social media platforms has significantly affected the sleeping patterns of young people. Many adolescents and young adults spend extended hours online, particularly during nighttime, resulting in insufficient sleep duration and poor sleep quality.

Research indicates that excessive screen exposure before bedtime interferes with the production of melatonin, a hormone responsible for regulating sleep cycles, thereby contributing to sleep disturbances and fatigue (Hale & Guan, 2015). From a sociological perspective, technological advancement has transformed daily routines and social expectations. The culture of constant connectivity encourages youth to remain available online, often sacrificing sleep for digital engagement. Social media notifications, online gaming, and entertainment platforms create pressures that delay bedtime and disrupt healthy routines. Consequently, sleep deprivation has become a growing public health concern among adolescents.

Poor sleep is strongly associated with anxiety, depression, irritability, reduced concentration, and impaired academic performance. Studies have found that inadequate sleep negatively affects emotional regulation and increases vulnerability to psychological distress (Twenge et al., 2018). Moreover, chronic sleep problems may contribute to long-term physical health issues, including obesity, weakened immunity, and cardiovascular risks. From a social work perspective, promoting healthy sleep habits is essential for improving youth mental health. Social workers, educators, and parents can educate young people about responsible technology use, screen-time management, and sleep hygiene practices. Encouraging digital-free periods before bedtime can enhance psychological well-being and emotional stability. Protecting sleep quality is therefore critical for fostering healthy human development in a digitally connected society

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND DIGITAL MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Digital technology has created numerous opportunities for human empowerment by expanding access to education and mental health resources. Online learning platforms, virtual classrooms, educational applications, and digital libraries have transformed traditional approaches to learning. Youth can now access high-quality educational content regardless of geographical location, thereby promoting knowledge acquisition and skill development. Technology also supports personalized learning experiences that cater to individual needs and learning styles (Selwyn, 2016). In addition to educational benefits, digital technology has enhanced access to mental health support services. Online counseling, teletherapy, mental health applications, and digital support groups provide valuable resources for young people experiencing emotional difficulties. These services reduce barriers related to distance, stigma, and limited availability of mental health professionals. Research indicates that digital mental health interventions can effectively support emotional well-being, stress management, and psychological resilience (Naslund et al., 2020).

From a sociological perspective, digital technologies contribute to social inclusion by connecting individuals to information, services, and support networks. They facilitate participation in educational and community activities, thereby strengthening social capital and human development. However, inequalities in access to technology continue to create challenges for disadvantaged populations. Social workers play an important role in promoting digital inclusion and ensuring equitable access to educational and mental health resources. By integrating technology into social work practice, professionals can reach underserved populations and provide timely support. Therefore, digital technology represents a powerful tool for empowering youth and enhancing their psychological and educational outcomes when used responsibly and ethically.

HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY: THE ROLE OF FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY IN DIGITAL WELL-BEING

Promoting digital well-being among youth requires collective responsibility from families, schools, and communities. As digital technology becomes increasingly integrated into everyday life, these social institutions play a crucial role in guiding young people toward healthy and responsible technology use. Family environments significantly influence children's digital behaviors. Parents who maintain open communication and establish clear guidelines regarding technology use can help reduce risks associated with excessive screen time and online exposure (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Schools also play a critical role in fostering digital literacy and mental health awareness. Educational institutions can teach students how to use technology responsibly, recognize online risks, and develop critical thinking skills. Programs addressing cyberbullying, digital citizenship, and emotional well-being contribute to healthier digital environments. Teachers can identify signs of technology-related distress and provide appropriate support or referrals when necessary.

Communities further contribute by creating safe spaces where youth can engage in recreational, cultural, and social activities beyond digital environments. Community organizations can organize awareness campaigns, workshops, and support services that promote balanced lifestyles and psychological well-being. From a social work perspective, collaboration among families, schools, and communities is essential for preventing technology-related mental health problems. Social workers often act as facilitators who connect these stakeholders and advocate for youth-centered interventions. Strengthening social support systems can help young people develop resilience, healthy coping strategies, and positive digital habits. Ultimately, shared responsibility is necessary to ensure that digital technology contributes positively to human development rather than becoming a source of psychological harm.

HUMAN-CENTERED SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS FOR YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The increasing influence of digital technology on youth mental health has created new responsibilities and opportunities for the social work profession. Social work is fundamentally concerned with promoting human well-being, enhancing social functioning, and empowering individuals to overcome challenges. In the digital age, social workers are increasingly addressing issues such as cyberbullying, digital addiction, anxiety, depression, online victimization, and social isolation among young people. These challenges require innovative interventions that combine traditional social work values with contemporary technological realities (Reamer, 2018). From a human-centered perspective, social work interventions focus on strengthening the resilience, coping skills, and emotional well-being of youth. Individual counseling enables young people to discuss technology-related stressors and develop healthy behavioral patterns. Group work interventions provide opportunities for peer support, emotional expression, and collective problem-solving. School social workers play an important role in identifying students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties associated with excessive digital engagement and connecting them with appropriate resources.

Community-based interventions are equally important. Social workers organize awareness campaigns, workshops, and educational programs that promote digital literacy, responsible technology use, and mental

health awareness. Family counseling helps parents understand the impact of digital technology on youth behavior and encourages healthy communication regarding online activities. Social workers also advocate for policies that protect children and adolescents from harmful digital content and cyber exploitation. Furthermore, technology itself can be integrated into social work practice through tele-counseling, online support groups, and digital mental health services. Such approaches increase accessibility, particularly for youth living in remote or underserved areas. By combining prevention, intervention, advocacy, and education, social work contributes significantly to protecting youth mental health and promoting positive human development in an increasingly digital society.

HUMAN RIGHTS, DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP, AND FUTURE POLICY DIRECTIONS

As digital technology continues to transform society, policymakers face the challenge of ensuring that technological progress supports human rights and youth well-being. The concept of digital citizenship emphasizes responsible, ethical, and respectful participation in online environments. Young people must be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate digital spaces safely while respecting the rights and dignity of others. Promoting digital citizenship is therefore essential for addressing the mental health challenges associated with technology use (Ribble, 2015). From a sociological perspective, public policies play a critical role in shaping digital environments and influencing social behavior. Governments, educational institutions, technology companies, and civil society organizations must collaborate to establish regulations that protect youth from cyberbullying, online harassment, misinformation, exploitation, and privacy violations. Policies should also address inequalities in digital access to ensure that all young people benefit from technological advancements regardless of socioeconomic status (Livingstone, 2022).

Mental health promotion should be integrated into national digital policies. Schools should incorporate digital literacy and mental health education into curricula, enabling students to recognize and manage technology-related risks. Technology companies should be encouraged to design platforms that prioritize user safety and psychological well-being. Additionally, greater investment is needed in research exploring the long-term effects of digital technology on youth mental health. From a social work perspective, advocacy remains a central strategy for promoting equitable and supportive digital environments. Social workers can influence policy development by highlighting the experiences of vulnerable youth and advocating for preventive interventions. Future policies must balance innovation with human welfare, ensuring that technology serves as a tool for empowerment rather than a source of psychological harm. Such efforts will contribute to healthier, safer, and more inclusive digital societies.

CONCLUSION

Digital technology has become an inseparable part of contemporary human life, profoundly influencing the experiences, relationships, and mental health of young people. While technological advancements have created significant opportunities for education, communication, creativity, and personal development, they have also introduced challenges such as cyberbullying, digital addiction, anxiety, depression, social isolation, and sleep disturbances. Sociological perspectives demonstrate that technology is not merely a tool but a powerful social force that shapes human behavior, cultural values, and social interactions. Simultaneously, social work perspectives emphasize the importance of promoting resilience, mental well-

being, social support, and responsible technology use. A human-centered approach is essential for addressing the complex relationship between digital technology and youth mental health. Families, schools, communities, policymakers, and social workers must collaborate to create supportive environments that encourage healthy digital engagement. Educational initiatives promoting digital literacy, emotional intelligence, and responsible online behavior can help young people navigate digital spaces safely. Social work interventions, including counseling, advocacy, community outreach, and digital mental health services, provide valuable support for youth facing technology-related challenges. Ultimately, the goal is not to discourage technological advancement but to ensure that digital innovation contributes positively to human development and well-being. By balancing technological opportunities with appropriate safeguards, society can foster healthier, more resilient, and socially connected youth capable of thriving in an increasingly digital world.

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